

symptomatic

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Summary: Ignoring the guilt within him, Asriel goes to his father's garden to gather the much needed flowers for his friend. It was the only way to free monsterkind from their prison, after all. Finding Sans there makes his task much more difficult.

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This story makes heavy references to my other fic, 'reverse psychology.' Highly suggested to read that before this one.

Even so, the necessary info: Asriel and Sans were once friends in the past, but misunderstandings regarding Asriel's human friend has left their friendship divided. Believing Sans may just hurt his friend, Asriel wonders if the skeleton can be trusted anymore...

He can only side with one friend, either way.

* * *

><p>"Find the flowers for me." Asriel couldn't refuse.

The garden his father tended to graced the throne room, a place where the king of monsters would accept his people's request and complaints. It was one of the few locations in the Underground where at least a slip of the sky could be seen. Here were the echoes of birdsong, and the faint scent of a spring breeze — just simple traces of the Surface. But Asriel had liked being here, as did his best friend. They'd rush around the chamber for hours, always messing up a row of tulips or two. The king never got angry over it, and just patiently planted more as his children apologized — not for the first time.

It was midday, and a busy one at that. Asriel heard soft voices in the living room, where his father was conversing with another person. An important person, he figured, if the king was speaking with someone within his private home instead of the castle. He didn't pay much attention to who it was though, or to the way those hands moved as words were said. He only gave thought in how he could sneak out the front door, go down the streets of the capital, past the long, golden corridor, and through the castle where all those public speeches were held.

It was easy enough. He traveled quickly, a satchel hanging from his left shoulder, bare feet padding across flat stonework. He went from the usual darkness of the caverns to the hint of sunlight that streamed from tall windows, the delta rune crest emblazoned in the glass work. The pawed surface of his feet barely made a sound against the tiles, and from there it wasn't long before he reached the public throne room through the gigantic double-doors, where two large thrones faced out over a vista of yellow, orange, and purple hues.

Asriel stood in the center, among flower patches and freshly cut grass. The roses were recently pruned, and the weeds already pulled out to make room for the newly-planted seeds that would spring forth in just a few weeks. His muzzle curved slightly, unsure how such a pun had stealthed its way into his brain, and then he shook it away. No, this was important. He had to get this done, and he had to get it done soon.

His best friend was still sitting in their room back home, waiting for him.

The prince took a deep breath, trying to differentiate the scents between flowers, between the daffodils and the dandelions, between the carnations and the goldenrods, but it was difficult. Some were more potent than others, but the buttercups would have a particular sweetness to them.

After the incident with the pie, Asgore pointedly planted less of those particular flowers. But not all.

"In the back," Asriel said aloud, eyes roving toward the walls, where rows of plants hid behind rose bushes and a smattering of foxgloves and lilacs. He walked forward.

Then he promptly tripped.

"Ow!" Asriel hit the side of his muzzle against the ground, happening to hit more hard soil than flower. He blinked, shaking away the ache building between his eyes. His legs seemed to be splayed acrossâ€¢ some lump? A lump that was somehow more ridged than anything and-

"heya kiddo."

"AHH!" He scrambled back, upsetting more of the plants, crushing a few petals, pollen drifting into the air.

Sans decided to sit up then. He casually scratched at his skull, then cracked his back slightly, hands pressing against it as he stretched. Joints popped rather grotesquely, and he cemented the experience by

giving his own neck a little twist. Finger bones flexed continually, with no sign of stopping.

"why'd you wake me from my nap?" he asked through an assortment of pops.

Forgetting for the moment that he was supposed to be avoiding Sans now, Asriel glared. "W-Why are you napping out here in- in the first place?"

Sans looked around the chamber slowly. He made one final snap of his wrist before he was satisfied. "it's a nice day for a nap."

He was not supposed to be here. Not at all. No. Asriel was about to tell him so, but the words stayed in his throat. It was because of the pollen, yeah. It was just too heavy right now.

The skeleton clambered to his legs, doing so at such a sluggish pace that Asriel got impatient just by watching. The flowers shifted at his motion, their blank faces seeming to turn towards him. Sans was wearing the same thing that he wore when he saw him last time at the Core. White coat over the casual blue hoodie and trousers, and sneakers that hung loosely from his feet. There was still that missing identification card, as evidenced by the lonely pin.

Sans stuck his hands in his pant pockets, slid around on his heel and faced the prince of monsters. "sup?"

Asriel did his best to keep his pout and glare. He stood up as tall as he could, trying to recreate the presence that his father would have whenever he spoke with people. "Other monsters aren't allowed in here, you know. You need the King's permission, and he definitely doesn't just let people in by themselves!"

"gonna tell on me then?"

"Ye â€“ N-no!" Asriel stuttered, then tried to cross his casually. "I don't need to tell him. I can order you out of here, too."

"i bet." Sans winked. "but, uh, actually got the pass from your old man. see, boss of mine is talking with him right now, very hush hush, and i have to stay behind to continue my field work."

Asriel glanced back to the flower beds. "so you were working?"

"hey, can't help it if i sometimes sleep on the job." He chuckled slightly. "kudos to your dad for making some real comfy weeds. felt like i turned over a new leaf."

Sans kept grinning, and looked at him expectantly.

Asriel didn't want to laugh. It was not a funny joke. None of his jokes were. His best friend said all his punchlines were tired and outdated, and they had never lied. Even so, as Sans kept up his smug grin, he felt his walls breaking down.

Of course, he laughed regardless.

Sans' smile seemed to grow. "look at that. i've already brightened up your day."

Asriel placed a paw over his mouth, trying his best to frown. Who knew that smiles could be so infectious? "I was justâ€¦ thinking about something else. Andâ€¦" He looked to the right, trying to remember where he was going to search. In the back, where the plants strayed just a bit of distance from the weak sunlight, but only by a little. "I have things to do."

"hey, don't let me stop ya." Sans remained where he was, slightly rocking back and forth on his heels.

Asriel stared. "Um." He scratched at his ears. "It's top secret! Soâ€¦ so you can't be here."

"no fair. i told you all of mine."

They both knew that was a dirty lie.

"fine, fine." Sans held up both skeletal hands before the angry goat monster could glare some more. Sometimes it was better to just admit defeat. "here, i'll just not look. deal?"

"But I don't-"

Sans seated himself back down in the flower patch. His white coat furled around him, looking suddenly much too big for his small body. "i just feel like stopping and smelling the roses today."

Asriel held back a long sigh. "You know you're sitting by the tulips."

"same difference."

The skeleton remained where he was. Then he stretched out his legs, hands planted behind him so he could lay back and tilt his skull up towards the sunshine â€" as if he hadn't made a huge show of getting up just five minutes ago.

"**Would you let Sans kill me?" **his best friend had asked.

Suddenly, a burst of rage sparked in Asriel's chest. All-encompassing, devouring his soul from the inside out. Fueled on by that smile that Sans always seemed to have, Asriel had never hated anyone as much as he hated this skeleton. All because Sans had been lying to him, spying on the fallen human and using him to find out whatever little information that the prince would give.

Asriel clutched the strap of his satchel in both hands. It was all his own fault anyway. That was why he had to do this now.

It took a moment for him to realize that Sans was staring at him.

"got a _stigma _against me, buddy?"

Asriel turned away, back to the flowers hidden to the far left. He recalled the ones he was looking for; innocent-looking golden petals, five in total, their center a multilayered array of soft fronds. Sometimes, when his father watered them, the droplets would cling

onto the petals, and shine against their glimmering surface like diamonds. Not that the other flowers weren't just as beautiful, but he had always been drawn to them. His fur protected them from the pollen that drifted from its center, so he had never known its more toxic qualities. His best friend had brushed a hand against one once, and had been stuck with a small rash that had lasted for a week.

"you know, botany ain't exactly my area of research, but i've looked into a few things about it."

Asriel started, turned back, wondering why Sans was still talking. The skeleton had taken one of the flowers in the hand, a white-colored lily, its bright hue blending seamlessly with his white skull. He twirled it around in its fingers like a tiny parasol, eye sockets closed. Asriel wondered how he got that flower, for those kind were more situated at the front steps towards the throne daises.

"Dad already taught me a lot about flowers," he said, taking a few more steps away.

"neat." Sans tapped boney fingers against his knee. "like how to grow them and such?"

"Yeahâ€|" Where was he going with this?

Eye sockets still closed, he suddenly produced another flower in his other hand, this one a purple-tinted hydrangea, its stem sprouting with multiple dark leaves. He opened one eye. "cool thing about flowers is how, uh, multi-talented they are. can make a bunch of things with them. ya know about that?"

"Um, a little bit." Asriel scratched at his cheek. "My dad likes to make fragrances and stuff with them, as a gift to my mom. He likes to press flowers too, to use as bookmarks. You can even eat some of them-"

He stopped, nearly choked, then turned further away.

Sans' voice floated to him very easily. "_garden_ a secret there, bud?"

Don't laugh, don't laugh. "No, I'mâ€| I'm just busy," he said, as if that sealed the matter. Tightening the satchel strap over his arm, Asriel walked away again, determined to get to that far left wall and not let anything else distract him.

"ya know, we study a lot from the surface. at work and stuff."

He tried his best to hold back a sigh. This was hard. He liked hearing Sans talk about his job, butâ€| "Um, isn't it top secret?" He decided to edge back a glance.

"eh, not really. a lot of the stuff we study we get from the dump. basically, anyone could learn it."

"â€|Oh."

Sans no longer held the flowers. Now they were both pinned to front

of his lab coat for some reason, a ludicrous pair of white and purple, one barely seen and the other sticking out like a tacky piece of decoration. "human books cover a lot of subjects. the only problem is sometimes the language they use can get a bitâ€|" he winked.
"_florid._"

Okay, that was super easy to not at all crack a smile at. Asriel was able to keep his resolute glare, but Sans chuckled enough for the both of them.

"come on, kid. that's all my best material."

"Yeah, right!" Asriel crossed his arms, then said proudly, "I guess you should make some different arrangements in your routine, huh?"

Sans, though still smiling, looked slightly confused.

"Likeâ€| like floral arrangements. You know, like florists make arrangements, and comedians makeâ€| jokes?"

Only then did Sans snicker, but definitely not for the right reasons. "wow, kid," he chuckled. "that was brutal."

Asriel felt heat rise to his face and hoped fervently that his fur would be enough to hide it away.

"hey, no sweat. i'm sure you'll _weed_ out a good joke or two later on."

The prince felt an eye twitch.

"i get it though. improv ain't easy. i definitely _photosympathize_ with ya there."

"Sans, stop that."

"but soon enough, you'll _blossom_ into the comedian lifestyle-"

"Sans!"

The skeleton kept laughing, wiping away at his eye sockets as Asriel whined. The prince couldn't do much but wait until the fits passed.

"okay, i'm done. really. i'm just gonna sit here and take root for a while."

Asriel threw up his hands in the air. "You're â€" you're just trying to distract me."

"hey, i thought we were just sharing jokes."

Asriel all but ran to the far left wall. "Anyway, I'm busy!" he shouted back, hoping the skeleton would be a bit more considerate.
"So, later, okay?"

"alright."

He had silence for a total of thirty seconds before Sans opened his big mouth again.

"so about them flowers."

Arrrghh. Just ignore him. Just. Ignore._ He finally got to his destination, and then placed his satchel carefully on the ground.

"humans have a bunch of books about them. nice pictures, nicer words even. really top-notch stuff. those books are definitely, heh, growing on me."

Ignoooore.

"so there's all this info on what flowers can do. i mean, some we already know anyway. like how some plants can help heal a bruise and stuff like thatâ€¹ and how they can cause them, too."

The best bet Asriel had was to continue his search. He got down his knees, avoiding the plots of freshly-planted seeds and then scurried forward.

"your dad's got a lotta poisonous stuff here, don't he?"

Asriel only risked one more glance. Sans was holding up another flower, the nightshade, with its cone-like shape and its long, outward middle bulb, though stripped of its berries. Asriel turned around again, noticing one of the flowers from the nearby row of nightshade to be missing.

"this stuff can be pretty bad for both monsters and humans. and each have their own different level of hurt. i mean, some â€œ he held up a small, yellow flower with six sharp-pointed petals arranged like one of those legendary stars, a daffodil â€œ "can just cause a rash, maybe a stomach ache or two if you decided to snack on 'em, while othersâ€¹" He shifted his fingers and then the flower retracted up his sleeve, and out came another â€œ a different yellow flower, its petals rounded, surrounding a center of gentle fronds, "can really pack quite a punch."

Asriel didn't dare say a thing. No. This wasn't Sans' business. He didn't care. He was doing this for his best friend. "I know about that stuff," he said.

"do ya though?" Sans' voice came back almost bitingly, despite his still carefree smile.

Asriel pointedly turned away. His hands scrabbled a bit at the dirt to make a path for him.

"humans seem to get the shaft when it comes to poisonings though. and for these little bright buds, it's a pretty long list of stuff they go through." He heard Sans laugh lightly. "care to hear?"

He searched among his father's rose bushes, angling clear from the frail and white hemlock, sidling past leaves to reach for those dazzling flowers in the back.

"a monster gets sick from eating those, and we definitely don't have

a good time with it. our magic starts to destabilize, so we're left to bed, maybe sweat a little, until it all breaks down into dust. but only if we eat an armful of it. otherwise, we're just knocked out of commission for a few days."

His dad had been deathly sick that one time, limbs shivering, risking going beyond the unreachable. Asriel had apologized over and over, comforted by his father's hands that patted his head. His best friend hadn't gone near, but stayed in the doorway, snickering under their breath.

He recognized the petals immediately. One was missing from its group on the right side. Well, he might as well finish what Sans started. He gripped one stem and wrenched it from the soil.

"now humans, they're trickier. lot of complex parts, way more fluids, and way more things to break. good for them though, because they can stand up to things better than we can. but, heh, sometimes the result is not pretty. and when they can't pull through? it can get downright pretty gross."

He took away three flowers, stuffed them into his satchel. He was careful to unearth them from the ground with no damage to the stem itself. Roots trailed from their ends, sticking out of his satchel as he collected them. Kneeling more comfortably, he continued his search.

"poison isn't fun for anyone. it makes itself home inside their bloodstream right away. and that bloodstream is always going places too. so the toxins mooch along for the ride, and stop off at those important parts." Sans counted off the following, joints creaking as he did so. "the liver, the lungs, kidneys, bladder. yeah, gross. and it sometimes hits the heart, attacks their circulatory functions, and can even reach into the brain if the toxins are uh, determined about it."

Asriel slowed, but still he looked away.

"hits the immune system too and gets it all out of whack. inflammation starts building up out of nowhere, white cells attack the good ones â€“ eh, i'm probably going over your head with this. it just means that all the little soldiers in the body are maiming and killing their own citizens, while the criminals go scot-free to rob the banks." Sans paused. "and then that starts to manifest. physically."

The prince shivered, hands becoming still.

"get blisters on the mouth, eyes get all puffy, nasty rash everywhere."

The scent of buttercups were sweet, cloying, invasive.

"go through seizures, ulcers start building internally, can even have the airways tighten so it's hard to breathe. and if they wanna eat? yeah, fuhgeddaboudit. they'd have better luck wishing for the barrier to fall. and sometimes they start hallucinating too, you know, when the toxins get ahold of the brain center, or if the pain is just that bad. which. it usually is."

Asriel bowed his head.

"their body starts attacking them to get rid of the poison, but everything's getting hijacked. so they might throw up a little, or a lot. start leaking a lot of stuff, going through convulsion central, then they just keep drowning in their own fluids until"

"Stop it."

Complete silence followed Asriel's plea. He didn't dare turn around. He wondered just what kind of smile he would see.

Asriel wiped at his muzzle, at the tears clogging up his fur. His satchel lay next to him. He crouched, hands placed over his long floppy ears. "Leave me aloneâ€| please?"

He didn't hear the skeleton make any movement, but suddenly knew he was there, standing next to him. "kid," Sans started, and, hesitated. Why would he do that? "i'm just sayingâ€| i don't think you're ready for this kind of responsibility."

The prince shifted, bringing his knees up to his chin, wrapping his arms around his legs. At least, he didn't make any sound as he cried. His best friend would be fine with that, right?

Sans waited patiently until his tears dried, something that Asriel wanted to say that he didn't need to do. But any deep breath would have resulted in hiccups, and would make him give himself up to outright bawling. He reigned in everything, feeling an eyeless stare and nothing else.

"but hey, at least you got a nice bouquet out of it. can definitely brighten a room up if ya ever need to."

A sneaker creased its way across the ground. The satchel next to him moved. "just stick these in a vase and you're good to-

Asriel lunged at the skeleton, grasping the satchel by its sides, ripping it from the other's hands. Flowers scattered, dropping to the ground like falling leaves. _"These are mine!"_

He wasn't sure what he saw in Sans' face. Nothing changed, not really. But he thought a saw color brighten, appearing within a dark eye socket like a water ripple. He didn't care for the warning. He tugged away the satchel, clinging it to his chest, not caring whether the petals touched his face.

"kiddo-"

"Why can't you take a hint? Just go away!" Asriel scrambled backward into the rows of flowers, keeping his eyes on Sans. That color in his eye was gone, but that didn't mean anything. "I won't let you hurt them! I won't let you take my best friend away from me!"

Sans had slowly put his hands back in his pockets, keeping his gaze level with the prince. "hehâ€|" His voice was a pitch lower. "where'd you get that idea, kid?"

Asriel hugged the satchel tighter. The flowers would be crushed. It didn't matter. It'd still be enough. "They told me you were following

them. That's why you were in the Ruins, and you only helped me because—" He stopped, hating to see that first meeting in a different light. "That's the only reason you even talked with me, isn't it?"

There was roaring inside his ears, one that always came whenever he cried. It was a sensation he was becoming much too familiar with lately.

"told ya i was on a job."

Asriel didn't want to cry again. He didn't want to look even more weak. He just hated the fact that Sans hadn't even tried to lie.

"but you know, some jobs always bring new things to the table. keeps it interesting." Nothing followed those words for a while. It made Asriel perk his ears up, then risk a glance toward the skeleton. He was still smiling, but he actually looked like he didn't know what else to say. "alsoâ€| brings in a lot of complications, too."

How did things get so complicated now? Asriel's eyes flicked back from the skeleton to his flowers. He slowly unclenched his arms, looking at the frazzled yellow petals within its contents.

"in the end, i'm just trying to keep an eye on things. testing out new theories and all." He winked, head bowed slightly, apologetically almost. "and as a bonus, i like to keep an eye out for my friends."

He couldn't take it. "But we're not friends."

Sans didn't have a ready answer for that.

"You're just some dumb spy, trying to get me to talk about them." Like at the lab, and at the core even. "You've been lying to me from the very beginning. Not like they do. If it weren't for them, I'd still be alone."

"look, kid—"

"Don't talk bad about them!" Asriel practically shrieked. "You don't know what they've been through!"

The echo of his voice bounced against the throne room's walls. The heat of fire burned his throat. He didn't know enough magic spells, just small ones from his mother's teachings; how to conjure a small flame, the size of a claw, for lighting candles. Or to reach out with both hands and heat a pot of water to boil. But nothing enough to hurt, not even to scorch the ground. That was what he wanted to do more than anything to the grinning skeleton.

"that expressionâ€|" Sans said, inclining his head. The brief sunshine played shadows across the valleys of his face, dimmed his pupils to nothing. "you really hate me that much?"

His rage instantly chilled to fear, and it was then that he was fully convinced. No wonder his best friend had clung to his hands, begging him for this favor.

"I won't let you hurt them. I won't."

Sans' smile was rigid and lifeless. "no, but you'll hurt them instead, huh? i'm sure assisted suicide does wonders for a friendship."

Asriel flinched. The words may as well have been a slap to the face.

Sans raised his head, eyes coming back. He didn't look much better. His shoulders slumped, resigned, but not content.

"just know there are some things you can't take back. sometimes it's best to quit while you're ahead."

The prince looked around him. He then slowly picked up the fallen buttercups, carefully putting them back in the satchel. Sans didn't respond.

"Then maybe you should follow your own advice." The scent of the flowers reached him, already making his chest burn.

He didn't look Sans' way. He turned back around, searching for more of the flowers. Not much. What he gathered would be more than enough.

"alright then." Pause. "see ya around, asriel."

He waited for footsteps to walk away, for that eerie clacking of bones. He didn't hear anything, only knowing that each time he swallowed, his head seemed to ache.

"You won't tell my dad?" Asriel asked. There was no answer. He didn't turn around to see him. Sans' presence was a known thing suddenly. The room was as empty as the silence in his head.

When he wiped away his tears, only then did he see the white tulip placed next to him on the ground.

After fastening the satchel tight, he left the throne room, carrying only the buttercups and nothing else.

* * *

><p>He got home at a good time. His father had gone outside into the streets of the Capital, still deep in his meeting with his visitor. Asriel went down the hallway, feet padding softly against the floorboards. At the door to his room, he knocked carefully.</p>

A voice told him to come in.

"Howdy!" Asriel greeted, quickly shutting the door and bringing the satchel around to his chest.

His best friend was seated at the floor, drawing the shape of a yellow flower on a piece of paper. They raised their head, greeting him in return.

"I got what you asked." Asriel opened the satchel flap, and a fragrance filled the room, engulfing his senses. "It's okay,

right?"

They smiled at him. Yes, this was perfect.

Asriel couldn't move forward. He couldn't keep going. He looked down at the buttercups, their image blurring in his eyes.

They asked him why he was crying. Again.

Asriel hunched in on himself. "I don't want you to die," he said, pleading the same argument, over and over. "I don'tâ€œ!"

Hadn't they already explained it? It was either this, or risk death another way. They had no choice.

"But he didn't sound like he actually wantedâ€œ toâ€œ!" His voice faded as his friend's smile widened.

He wanted his father to burst into the room, to see the flowers he carried. He wanted his mother to embrace him and gently take away those deadly instruments, so frail and subject to rot. He wanted them to. Sans must have told them by now. Right? That's what adults did, didn't they?

His best friend's voice filled his ears.

"**You really are an idiot, aren't you?"**

Asriel's eyes latched onto the flower drawing. It wasn't fully colored in, and the petals were of varying sizes. He walked forward, kneeling on the soft carpet.

"I'm sorry," Asriel whispered.

Hands reached for his own, unfurling them from the treasure he carried.

It was alright. They patted his head, fingers gripping his fur painfully. They understood. They always understood. The satchel opened.

The flowers fell.

End
file.